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SUBJECT: SOMALIA - SHEIKH SHARIF AND THE FUTURE ROLE OF
ISLAMIC COURTS MODERATES

Classified By: Ambassador ranneberger for reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. Although Sheikh Sharif, the head of the Islamic Courts, executive branch has sometimes made harsh public statements, he is considered by most knowledgeable observers to be a moderate (the Ambassador took away that impression from his late August 2006 meeting with Sharif). Sharif is a respected and influential figure within Somalia and someone who could presumably contribute to dialogue and support for a broad-based national government. Sharif's close relationship with TFG Parliament Speaker Hassan could be helpful in that context. (Interestingly, Hassan said that TFG PM Gedi and Sharif are close relatives, although this was probably metaphorical since they are of different clans.)

¶2. While the Ambassador had made clear that channels were open for future contact, Sharif never followed up on the August meeting. The reason is likely that he lacked the authority to produce from the Islamic Courts, radicals what we requested in terms of action against terrorists.

¶3. After consultation with Washington, the Ambassador managed to reach Sharif by phone in Kismayo on December 31. Islamic Courts, Foreign Minister Addow participated in the call from the Ambassador's residence. The Ambassador told Sharif that it was the U.S. view that he could play an important role in helping to promote peace and stability in Somalia. He indicated that the U.S. was prepared to recommend that Kenya help bring him to Nairobi if he were prepared to give his commitment that he was willing to work to support peace and stability in Somalia based on the TFG Charter and the TFIs and to reject terrorism (he had already made the latter position clear in his August discussion with the Ambassador).

Sharif expressed appreciation for the Ambassador's efforts. Sharif said that he wanted to be part of the future of Somalia, but said that he could not leave Kismayo given that fighting had already begun.

¶4. Interestingly, TFG Speaker Hassan told the Ambassador January 1 that he spoke with Sharif following the Ambassador's conversation with Sharif. Sharif told Hassan that he wanted to accept the offer to come to Nairobi, but that he could not. The presence of hardline members of the Islamic Courts in the room when Sharif was speaking to the Ambassador prevented him from having a frank discussion. Sharif later told Hassan that he used the U.S. discussion with him to argue that the possibility was still open for the Courts to play a role in the future of Somalia, but that further violence would have to be avoided, and that this accounted for the only very limited resistance in the Kismayo area. (Trying to turn what was a rout into political capital with us certainly calls into question Sharif's credibility.)

¶5. Sharif is presumably now in flight somewhere in southern Somalia near the Kenyan border. It remains to be seen whether he will try to disengage himself from likely hardline elements he is with, seek to get across the border, and seek to play a constructive role in building Somalia's future. Hassan said that he is trying to get into contact with Sharif via a Thuraya phone. The Ambassador told Hassan that, while Sharif's failure to seize the opportunity on the 31st smacked of deliberate obfuscation, the channels are still open for discussion with him on the same terms.

RANNEBERGER